

~~This Application is a Continuation-in-Part of and incorporates by reference Application Serial Number 29/078,494, filed October 27, 1997 and issuing as United States Patent No. Des. 409,972 on May 18, 1999, all of which are commonly owned and assigned.~~

The present invention generally relates to towing of a performer by a vessel, and more particularly to enhancing performance of the performer using a water sport implement while maintaining stability of the vessel.

Wakeboarding has become one of the fastest growing sports in the world. In the sport of wakeboarding, there is an ever increasing need for the tow boat to create a larger wake to ride. Unlike waterskiing, the performer on a wakeboard is looking for as large a wake as possible. Further, by anchoring the tow line at a high elevation above the boat deck, the greater the ability of the performer to lift higher into the air, whether with a ski or wakeboard.

Tow rope pylons are known in the art, such as those described in U.S. Pat. No. 4,893,577 to Jennings and U.S. Pat. No. 4,641,597 to Paxton. A typical skiing and wakeboarding pylon has a height of approximately three feet to eight above the floor of the boat. Pylon heights have increased to accommodate the ever increasing height of jumps across the wake by wakeboarders. The extended pylons run a cable from the top of the pylon to the bow of the boat as a guy wire. This wire interferes with movement inside the boat. Further, these extended height pylons have not satisfied wakeboarders with their performance. They do give the performer the ability to get bigger air on the jumps, but the extended pylons flex too much when the performer cuts away or to the wake. During these cuts, the boat heels to a point of instability for the boat and a hazard for all concerned. The guy wire provides support when the skier is pulling straight back, but offers less support when the skier is pulling from the side.

The simplest way to increase the size of the wake is to increase the amount of weight inside a boat. Typically, this has been done by adding lots of people. Alternatively, the industry's response has been to include water bladders in the boat or other weighting materials such as buckets filled with concrete, rocks, or sand.

In one bladder system, a liner is placed inside of a canvas sack or bag. Filling the liner full of water by use of a bilge pump with hoses, wires and clips, can add weight to the back of a boat. However, this process is awkward and cumbersome. Another attempt at adding weight to the back of a boat is believed to include two gates on a transom of a boat. A cable is pulled to open the two gates and thereby flood two tanks located behind the transom of the boat. The tanks are drained by opening the gates. This system required a four foot high boat hull, where typical sports towing boats have a transom or hull height of only thirty inches from bottom to top of the gunwale.

As described, by way of example with reference to U.S. Pat. No. 5,645,003 to Grinde, it is known to add water for ballasting, typically uniformly along the length of the boat or forward, as in U.S. Pat. No. 4,528,927 to Iizuka et al. for enhancing the planing of the vessel. Typically ballast pumps are used to control the amount of water within the ballasting, as described, by way of example, with reference to U.S. Pat. No. 5,215,025 to Talmor.

It is typically thought that by simply adding more weight to the boat, the wake will become bigger and better. However, the shape of the wake is as important as the size.

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The perfect slope, length and hardness of the lip of a wake are also important to enable the performer to release from the wake and achieve a desired launch into the air. Further, it is important that wake control be done in a relatively rapid and timely manner, not available with use of a typical ballast pump.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

In view of the foregoing background, it is therefore an object of the present invention to improve the aerial characteristics of a performance by a performer using a water sport implement, such as a wakeboard or ski, by way of example, and being towed by a vessel while maintaining the stability of the vessel.

This and other objects, features, and advantages of the invention, are provided by a method aspect of the invention comprising the steps of providing a vessel behind which the performer is to be towed, the vessel including a bow, a stern and an operator station between opposing sides, and fitting a first relatively rigid vertical support structure to a first one of the sides and fitting a second relatively rigid vertical support structure to a second one of the sides, and then extending a generally horizontal bridging portion between upper extremities of the first and second vertically extending support structures, at a height substantially above the level of the operator station. A tow rope is attached to the horizontally extending bridging portion, and the vessel is operated in a body of water while towing the performer from the horizontally extending bridging portion.

In an alternate method, the first and second generally vertically extending support structures are pivotally attached to the respective sides of the vessel, so as to permit the first and second support structures to be rotated downwardly so that the vessel may pass underneath a bridge or into a boat house.

An apparatus of the present invention comprises a vessel behind which the performer is to be towed, the vessel including a bow, a stern and an operator station between opposing sides, a first relatively rigid vertical support structure fitted to a first one of the sides of the vessel, a second relatively rigid vertical support structure fitted to a second one of the sides of the vessel, and a generally horizontal bridging portion extending between upper extremities of the first and second vertically extending support structures, at a height substantially above the level of the operator station. A tow rope is attached to the horizontally extending bridging portion for towing the performer from the horizontally extending bridging portion while operating the vessel in a body of water.

In an alternate embodiment, the apparatus further comprises pivotally attaching means for attaching the first and second generally vertically extending support structures to the respective sides of the vessel, so as to permit the first and second support structures to be rotated downwardly so that the vessel may pass underneath a bridge or into a boat house. In yet another embodiment, each of the first and second vertical support structures comprise a forward vertical support element and an aft vertical support element, and wherein the apparatus further comprises a plurality of transversely extending bars between each of the forward and aft vertical support elements.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF DRAWINGS

A preferred embodiment of the invention as well as alternate embodiments are described by way of example with reference to the accompanying drawings in which:

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FIG. 14 is a schematic of a ballast tank control system of the present invention.

The present invention will now be described more fully hereinafter with reference to the accompanying drawings, in which preferred embodiments of the invention are shown. This invention may, however, be embodied in many different forms and should not be construed as limited by the embodiments set forth herein. Rather, these embodiments are provided so that this disclosure will be thorough and complete, and will fully convey the scope of the invention to those skilled in the art. Like numbers refer to like elements throughout.

Referring now initially to FIGS. 1-3, a preferred embodiment of the present invention is herein described, by way of example, by a water sports system 10 for improving aerial characteristics of a performance by a performer 12 using a water sports implement such as a wakeboard 14. The system 10 comprises a vessel 16 behind which the performer 12 is to be towed. The vessel 16 includes a bow 18, a stern 20, and an operator station 22 between opposing starboard and port sides 24, 26. A towing structure referred herein as a vertical support unit 100 is fitted to the vessel 16. The vertical support unit 100, as will be further described later in this section, includes an upper portion 102 at a height above the level of the operator station 22 and is adapted for securing a tow rope 28 thereto. The tow rope 28 is attached to the upper portion 102 of the vertical support unit 100 for towing the performer 12, as illustrated again with reference to FIG. 1. The system 10 further includes a ballast assembly 200 which includes starboard and port ballast tanks 202, 204 fitted onboard and only aft, preferably within only the stern 20, extending from the transom toward amidships of the vessel 16, unlike typical ballast systems which fully extend bow to stern. Alternate embodiments include a single ballast tank. An extractor 206 is fitted to the hull of the vessel 16

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It is to be noted that various sized vessels will have varying length ballast tanks for extending the tank from the transom area to toward amidships to provide a desirable wake. Simply weighting down the vessel stern only approximate the transom leads to excess plowing of the vessel and an undesirable wake. Further, displacement boats having ballast from stern to bow, typically do not permit planing, desirable in a sports towing vessel. As a result, a certain amount of planing is to be maintained. By extending the ballast tank as herein described, an effective vessel performance and wake is achieved. Without deviating from the invention, alternate embodiments are now herein described.

In yet another embodiment, and with reference to FIG. 4, the vertical support unit 100 comprises a pylon 118 extending from the floor 34 of the vessel 16 and having an upper portion adapted for securing the tow rope 28 thereto. As illustrated again with reference to FIG. 2, and illustrated further with reference to FIG. 5, a tow rope connecting element 120 is attached to the upper portion of the vertical support unit 100, preferably to the horizontal bridging port 108 of the aft U-shaped support structure 112 for attaching the tow rope 28 thereto. The tow rope connecting element is mounted at a height 36 between 6' 3" and 7 feet above the floor 34 of the vessel 16, but it is expected that other heights will be selected by those skilled in the water sports arts. At this height 36, passengers on the vessel can comfortably walk under the U-shaped support structure 112 and the tow line 28 extending rearwardly from the boat for pulling the performer 12 while, at the same time, maintaining stability for the vessel 16 as the performer maneuvers around the vessel during the performance.

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In preferred embodiments of the ballast tanks 202, 204 and with reference again to FIGS. 3 and 14, the ballast tanks are enclosed and each have an opening arranged through vent lines 214, 216 for venting air into and out of each of the enclosed tanks 202, 204 respectively. Further, an air control valve 218 is within easy reach by the vessel operator for manually controlling air venting to each of the ballast tanks. It is anticipated that electrically, pneumatically or hydraulically operated control valves may be appropriate. The extractor 206, earlier described, includes a water scoop 220 positioned below the water line 212 and on the hull 46 of the vessel 16 for extracting the ballast water 208 from the body of water 30 as the vessel 16 moves through the body of water and delivering the ballast water 208 through a water intake line 221 connected between the scoop 220 and ballast tanks 202, 204. In an alternate embodiment, a two way pump 222 is placed within the line 221 and used for enhancing the extracting and dumping of the ballast water 208. Further, a shut off valve 223 is fitted within the line 221. As illustrated

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